



## Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

### May is a very active month in the garden!

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The soil is warm, the skies are clear. It's a great time to plant.

#### **In the vegetable garden.**

Still plenty of time to plant tomatoes!

Choosing which tomato varieties to plant can be daunting, given how many varieties there are. Give some thought to how you primarily use them: sauce, salsa, salads, snacks?

If you're limited for space, look for "determinate" types, or the new 'bush' (compact) varieties of old favorites.

You can check out our recommendations here:

[https://www.davisenterprise.com/features/gardening/tomatoes-don-s-top-20/article\\_2d2acade-b8b2-59e8-ba65-fb89f9bf57db.html](https://www.davisenterprise.com/features/gardening/tomatoes-don-s-top-20/article_2d2acade-b8b2-59e8-ba65-fb89f9bf57db.html)

The soil is finally warm enough to plant peppers and eggplants, tomatillos and ground cherries, cucumbers, melons, okra, pumpkins, summer squash, sweet corn, and winter squash. Just a few quick tips about these summer favorites.

#### **Peppers**

Bell peppers benefit from some afternoon shade to prevent sunburn of the fruit. Nearly all other peppers are easier to grow. Gypsy, sweet banana, Italian long green, and Marconi are sweet peppers that yield well without special protection.

Shishito peppers have become very popular in recent years. The trend started, as the name suggests, in Japan. About one plant out of ten produces peppers that are about as hot as a jalapeño; the other plants produce sweet fruit. Apparently, this made them popular in bars because of the element of surprise.

Shishito plants yield very well here. Fine in full sun, they also produce well in some shade. The fruit, as with all peppers, ripens to red but they are most commonly eaten green.

#### **Eggplants**

Popularity of this tomato cousin has increased steadily over the years. While most Europeans seem to prefer the large-fruited types used for eggplant parmesan, smaller-fruited eggplants have always been popular in other forms of cuisine. More to the point, they're more productive here. Sold as Japanese eggplant, the fruit is long and thin and typically stronger flavored than the bigger types. Millionaire is a hybrid that is exceptionally productive.

#### **Cucumbers**

Bitter fruit has always been the biggest issue with cucumbers, wherever they are grown. Cucurbitacin is a terpene, a chemical that makes the leaves and fruit of cucumbers (and sometimes zucchini) bitter and repellent to herbivores.

Wild cucumbers are exceptionally bitter. Artificial selection and hybridization have reduced the presence of cucurbitacin in garden varieties to tolerable levels, but sometimes a combination of



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genetics and environmental stress can increase it. Drought stress may be a factor, as is extreme heat. But some types barely have any: Persian, “burpless”, and lemon cucumbers are rarely bitter.

Cucurbitacin is concentrated in the white flesh just under the skin, and mostly at the stem end. So, if you have a bitter variety, try cutting it further down into the fruit and peeling it more deeply. Salt also reduces our perception of bitterness.

Cucumber vines grow rapidly, yield for 4 - 6 weeks, and then peter out, so successive plantings are a good plan for continuous yield.

Squash, melons, pumpkins

Zucchini are famous for bumper harvests. But my observation here in the Valley is that zucchini production slows down during the heat of mid-summer. Other summer squash such as crookneck and scallop produce more consistently.

September is melon month for us as all the different types are ripening.

Melons take a lot of space, but they thrive in our climate and can be very rewarding if you have the room. Each plant takes at least a six-foot diameter area. Muskmelons (cantaloupes) and honeydews are the most productive. Charentais muskmelon has become very popular with home gardeners because it has an abundance of small fruit, light enough that you can even train the vine up onto a trellis or tomato cage to save space.

Watermelons need very warm soil, deep watering, and 11 to 12 weeks before you harvest (mark your calendar when you plant them, as determining ripeness of a watermelon is somewhere between an art and a science). You typically get 1 or 2 melons per plant. That may not seem like much, but they can easily weigh 15 to 25 lbs! If you're limited for space, Sugar Baby is a compact plant with good fruit in the 10-pound range.

Pumpkins are exceptionally vigorous vines, able to run 30 feet or more! They can be planted as late as July 1 for harvest in time for Hallowe'en. It's important that the vine keep growing vigorously as the fruit develops, so pumpkin plants need plenty of water. Interesting to note that pumpkins have been selected over the years to have sturdy stems for use as handles (jack-o'-lanterns are big business in the US). So, they hold the fruit well and can, surprisingly, be trained up onto a structure to save space.

For the space they consume, it's nice if the pumpkins you grow happen to be dual-purpose. For pies, look for Sugar variety. For seeds, there are hull-less varieties whose seeds are more tender and roast well, such as Godiva and Jarrahdale.

If you want a beautiful pumpkin for decorating, jack-o'-lanterns, and some of the finest flesh available for making pies, I recommend Rouge Vif d'Etampes, which is usually sold in the US as Cinderella.

### **The herb garden.**

Growing kitchen herbs is easier here than almost anywhere else in the world. Popular kitchen herbs love sunshine and high temperatures, and many such as oregano, rosemary, sage, and thyme are drought tolerant.



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Basil is the most popular summer herb, and plant breeders have been busy. Sweet basil is *Ocimum basilicum*.

Thai basil is a subspecies of sweet basil that has a different, stronger, somewhat astringent flavor.

African blue basil is a sterile hybrid that has its own unique flavor. Hybridization between these species, and others, has led to some new types of basil for the home gardener.

The 'tower' series of basil consists of hybrids that have the flavor profile of sweet basil, but which don't flower. Gardeners who are accustomed to pinching off the flowers of sweet basil in order to keep them growing will find these new types continue all the way into late fall.

Magic Mountain is a new variety of basil grown primarily for the summer-long display of showy flowers which contrast nicely with the purplish-green foliage. Bees and butterflies are very attracted to the flowers.

All types of basil prefer full sun but can be grown in light shade. Unlike the woody herb plants, basil does best with plenty of irrigation.

### In the flower garden

Time for heat-loving flowers!

Some of our best summer flowers to plant now from seed or transplants:

- Marigolds are popular because they are purported to repel insects. This is actually a myth or perhaps a misunderstanding. Certain types of marigolds do suppress the populations of certain types of nematodes, but marigolds are not impervious to pests. However, marigold flowers attract butterflies and other beneficials.
- Zinnias and sunflowers are native to Mexico and the American southwest and plains, thriving in full summer sun. Butterflies in particular love zinnias, as do hummingbirds. Sunflowers attract many species of native and non-native bees as well as copious other beneficial insects, and also attract hummingbirds.
- Celosia and amaranthus have very showy flowerheads, even in extreme heat.
- Cosmos is another easy-to-grow daisy that blooms most heavily in late summer and fall.

### Color in the shade:

- Nasturtiums are easy to grow from seed, have attractive foliage and very pretty flowers, and are among the most popular edible flowers. In our climate they prefer summer shade. The plants can survive the winter and bloom again next spring.
- Fibrous begonias are reliable and bloom all summer, with edible flowers being a nice bonus. Fuchsia triphylla, the firecracker fuchsia, is an easy-to-grow small shrub with profuse blooms nearly year-around. Mine have resprouted even from winter temperatures in the mid-20s. Fuchsia triphylla is very attractive to hummingbirds.
- Colorful foliage has long been an easy answer for shade gardens. Caladiums are planted from tubers in May and have bright, tropical leaves from June through October. Note that they are toxic. Coleus is mainly grown for the colorful mottled and splotched leaves. The flowers are reasonably pretty, and you can disregard the long-standing advice to pinch them off.



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Slow from seed, easy from cuttings, coleus prefers bright shade and plenty of water. Dwarf types are great for containers.

### Planting in the heat?

When daytime high temperatures get into the 90's, folks get concerned about transplanting and think they've "missed the season." We have a long growing season; our summer vegetables and flowers are subtropical or tropical plants (love heat!) and adapt well when planted into warm soil. You may not like the heat, but these plants do. You can plant all through the months of May and June.

For better results:

- Plant in the cool of the day for your own health and comfort and less transplant stress for the seedlings. Early evening is a great time to plant.
- Water each plant thoroughly at the time of planting, at least one or two gallons of water.
- Check daily and water as needed, typically every 2 to 3 days at first but more often if it's unusually hot or windy.
- Mulch to smother weeds, shade the soil, and retain moisture.
- In garden soil water more deeply and less often as the season goes along. Raised planters may need daily watering through the summer because of the faster-draining soils that are usually used in them.

We see many problems with vegetable gardens in the summer, and the majority result from inadequate irrigation. Drip systems need to run for a long time to give adequate depth and distribution of water.

Plant now, check daily, water deeply, pull or smother weeds, and prepare to enjoy your summer harvest.



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Amaranthus is a versatile plant. Flowers are showy and attract beneficials. The foliage is edible and the seeds are favorites of songbirds. Easy to grow, amaranth can be planted directly from seed in a sunny location.



Magic Mountain is a new kind of basil, grown for the long flowering season as well as the aromatic foliage. Bees love it! Full sun is best for this basil, but sweet and Genovese basil can be grown in light shade.



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Celosia has fascinating flowerheads. The crested form, shown here, gets bigger and bigger as the season progresses, and the flowers can be dried. Full sun.





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Marigolds have long been popular for planting among vegetables. While the notion that they repel insects is not evidence-based, marigolds draw bees and butterflies.



Shishito peppers are increasingly popular. Some plants have very hot peppers, while most are sweet. Very productive plants yield from July through October, with fruit ripening to red late in the season.



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Rouge Vif d'Etamps is a dual-purpose pumpkin with vivid orange skin. Suitable for a jack-o'-lantern, it also has very fine-grained flesh that makes excellent pies. Sometimes sold in the US as Cinderella.



Scalloped squash, sometimes called pattypan, are more reliable producers through the summer than zucchini.



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Watermelons take a lot of space! But if you have the room, they can be rewarding. These two weighed 24 lbs and 20 lbs. Plant in full sun, water deeply, don't let them get crowded by other plants or weeds.



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Caladiums give a big splash of color in the shade from June through October. They're easy to grow in containers. Plant in May or June from tubers or young transplants.